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20 October 1983

ABROAD AT HOME

A Different America

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Oct. 19 — Imagine a government in which all the significant officials dealing with foreign policy and defense — many thousands of them — are subject to random polygraph tests at all times. The same officials must sign an intimidating document binding them to submit virtually everything they write on those subjects to official censors for the rest of their lives, even after they leave the government.

It sounds like a vision of George Orwell's. It is in fact the Reagan Administration's vision of what the United States Government should be. So we learned in an extraordinarily informative hearing held today by the House Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security.

The subject of the hearing was the National Security Decision Directive issued by President Reagan last March 11. It had two purposes: to bind all officials with access to what is called Sensitive Compartmented Information to a lifetime censorship system, and to broaden the use of polygraphs in Government to investigate leaks.

Richard K. Willard, a Deputy Assistant Attorney General, told the subcommittee how the Administration wants to use so-called lie detectors. His picture went far beyond any previous explanation of the Reagan order.

Polygraph tests, he said, could be given "on an aperiodic basis to randomly selected employees" with access to especially secret information. If they refuse to take the test, they would lose their clearance. How many people would be subject to that menacing possibility? Mr. Willard did not say. But if he meant all those with access to S.C.I. — and he seemed to — that would be well over 100,000.

Various experts told the subcommittee that polygraphs were not reliable. Mr. Willard disputed that. But he said there was in any case "an additional benefit," their "deterrent effect." People who know they may be chosen for a polygraph test at any time, he said, "may be more likely to refrain from . . . misconduct."

Yes, intimidation might well have an effect. But what would such a system do to the quality of Federal employees? What kind of people would take responsible jobs if they were told at the start that they might at any time, for no stated reason, at the whim of a superior, be asked to take a humiliating, scientifically dubious test?

The same question applies to the other half of President Reagan's March directive. Who will be willing to give up forever what has been an American birthright — the right to speak without prior restraint — in order to take a government job?

George Ball, the former Under Secretary of State, said such an "indignity" would certainly be a deterrent to government service. "Its operative assumption," he said, "is that no official of the United States Government — even a Secretary of State or Defense or the President's National Security Adviser — can be trusted to exercise judgment."

Mr. Ball called the sweeping secrecy agreement that officials will be asked to sign in future "an appalling document." A Republican subcommittee member, Frank Horton of New York, said it was so broad that as a lawyer he would not advise a client to sign it. He said the absence of any time limit on the censorship burden was "one of the most abhorrent aspects."

Witness after witness at the subcommittee hearings spoke of the "unintended consequences" of the Reagan order — the chill on public discussion, the degrading of the public service. But I think the premise of those comments was wrong. The Reagan people who pushed the order through were well aware of those consequences — and welcomed them.

"It is as if the Administration weighed censorship as a positive good" in drafting the order, Prof. Lucas A. Powe Jr. of the University of Texas Law School said, "instead of an evil." Exactly. The promoters of the secrecy system are fanatics who do not share the traditional American belief that open debate makes this country stronger.

In short, what is involved here is a radical and deliberate change in the American system. And the Reagan Administration is trying to make that change without asking Congress for legislation — even without high-level explanation. An amazing aspect of the business is that Attorney General William French Smith has refused to testify before Congress about the March order, and no other senior official has publicly explained or defended it.

The question is whether Congress will sit still while the Administration slips through such a radical program — and whether sensible Government officials will. Some officials at the State and Justice Departments say privately that they cannot sign the humiliating agreement facing them. Will they speak up? Will Congress?